



Parsha Vayikra
Isaiah 43:21-44:23
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In the ancient literary world a book that had five chapters usually elevated the third to being of greatest importance. (see the Book of Lamentations- aicha and its emphasis on chapter 3). In the five books that make up the Torah it is not surprising that the third – the Book of Vayikra is also considered of central importance in the structure of the entire Torah.

This is somewhat strange for modern people who frequently view the sacrifices and the entire sacrificial system as a vestige of a primitive form of worship. As Maimonides liked to explain it: part of the natural development of the Jewish people from their primitive origins in a world dominated by sacrifice to a more sophisticated and mature way to relate to God as exemplified by prayer.

This is not how the Torah saw things and certainly not how the prophets did either. The Torah places sacrifices at the very center of the Jewish enterprise and the prophets similarly wrestled with sacrifices at the very core of their theology. If you want to read more on this subject, Chancellor Eisen has a wonderful chapter on Leviticus in his work: "Taking Hold of Torah."

If the Torah portion for this week introduces us to the importance of sacrifices as a key to understanding the entire Jewish enterprise. The haftarah comes from a moment some hundreds of years later and is part of a strongly worded rebuke by the prophet Isaiah where he clearly blames the people for not embracing sacrifices as the major cause of their downfall and exile.

"The people I formed for Myself shall declare My praise! But you have not worshipped Me, O Jacob...you have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings nor honored Me with your sacrifices. Isaiah 43:21

Name a key religious value.

Compassion? Kindness? Honesty? Love of God? Love of man?

It appears that for many of the prophets, certainly for Isaiah – integrity is one of the key religious values. "You have wearied Me with your iniquities." Isaiah 43:24

The prophet speaks to a people who have been exiled from their land and seem many of their loved ones annihilated. He speaks to a people decimated and depressed. How does his message help such a destitute people?

For the first time in human history – the prophets challenge the people to take responsibility for their fate. Rather than have them see themselves as victims, the prophet empowers the people to take control of their destiny. While it may seem harsh to say to those who have suffered such an awful fate: “this is your fault!,” the prophet recognizes that the people he loves is at a critical juncture in their history. They sit in exile, their homeland destroyed and they can choose to wither or see themselves as victims of history or masters of their fate. Those who see themselves as victims are doomed to passivity, forced to wait until others change their fate, hoping and praying that their fortunes will improve. But those who see themselves as masters of their own destiny take charge of their future and chart a new course for themselves and their children.

The theology of “on account of our sins were we exiled from our land” is not a case of blaming the victim but on the contrary of refusing to become a victim. For if it is my own actions that created my current circumstances then I also have the power to improve them. The prophet offers the people a way forward. If wrong living got me exiled then right living can redeem me. If hypocrisy destroyed the fabric of my society then integrity is the key to building a new one.

Isaiah goes on to rail against those who put their faith in idols and implores the children of Israel to remember that they are privileged to worship the one true God – who will forgive them if they will merely act in a manner deserving of forgiveness.

The book of Vayikra presents the keys to building a life and a society based on integrity. The haftarah of Isaiah offers the people a way back to a life of integrity after they have strayed. Leviticus says that to be human is to strive and reach and sometimes fail. Isaiah says that the people who fall can also pick themselves up and restore themselves to their former glory. “Shout for joy, O mountains...for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, has glorified Himself through Israel.”
Isaiah 44:23

Food for Thought:

1. I have maintained that the prophet saw integrity as a chief religious value. Do you agree? Are there other values you think are even more important? If you had to choose one value as the most important value a religious person should embrace what would it be?
2. I suggested that the prophets blaming the people for their fate was not a case of blaming the victim but rather a source of empowerment. Can you site contemporary examples where accepting responsibility (even when it might not be merited) is a powerful tool to avoid victimhood and passivity? Do you know people who like to blame everyone and everything for their own fate and refuse to look inward as to how they might have contributed to their current situation?
3. Do you think sacrifices are an important aspect of Judaism? How do you deal with this book and its location at the heart of the Torah in your personal theology?
4. The prophet Isaiah rails against those who put their faith in idols, “that have no wit or judgment..” Is idolatry a part of our ancient past – or is it alive and well and living in the 21st century? What might be examples of things people worship today that are undeserving of their ultimate faith and trust?

This week's Unraveller author, Rabbi Alan B. Lucas, has been Senior Rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom of Roslyn Heights, NY, since 1994. He was born in Cincinnati and graduated from the U. of Cincinnati. He attended the JTS, receiving his MA in Judaica in 1976 and Rabbinic Ordination in 1978. Rabbi Lucas has been extensively involved in community including serving as President of the South Jersey Board of Rabbis, Interfaith Area Clergy and sitting on the Board of Directors of numerous agencies including UJC Rabbinic Cabinet and the Chancellor's Rabbinic Cabinet of the JTS. He is on the Board of MERCAZ and was recently reappointed to the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement.